Sermon on the Reign of Christ 2019
(Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43)

In the grand hall the chairs are set, the sunlight streams in through the 20 foot high windows, the servants balancing trays of *hors d’ oeuvres* as the guests mingle.

In amongst the tapestries, the walls feature larger-than-life preternatural paintings of the country’s leaders, kings, queens and now in the modern era, prime ministers.

One spot on the wall is curtained, the unveiling of which is the purpose of this event. The rumours floating about that the current Prime Minister has requested a different sort of portrait; the choice of the artist seems to confirm this: more a street artist than someone with a portfolio featured in respected galleries.

The crowd hushes, and then as the artist pulls the curtain down, the crowd gasps.

This introduction is imaginary, and it probably owes its existence to the fact that Denise and I have been watching the third season of “The Crown.” It provides a nice backdrop for the Feast of the Reign of Christ, the last Sunday of that exquisite imaginary called “The Church Year.”

The readings assigned to our lectionary are the portrait’s brush strokes if you will. In our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah, the image of the shepherd is prominent.

Nothing could be more prosaic than stories of sheep and shepherds in the hill country of Israel; one would expect nothing less. The truly creative and daring thing in Israel’s tradition was applying the image of “the shepherd” first for the King (shepherds had a low status) and then for God!

Jeremiah’s polemic against the wicked shepherds is another daring move that, so different than all monarchies of the time, meant that for the first time we know, the power of the monarch was submitted to a higher arbiter: justice; kings were meant to operate for God, not *as* God.

Jeremiah talks of a branch of righteousness that will put God’s justice into effect, someone, we presume, who will create salvation for the people. The ruler will have the strange name “Yahweh is our righteousness.” This ruler will embody God’s own promise, faithfulness, justice and healing.

Jeremiah’s hope, Jeremiah’s plea was not enough to save Judah; even the so-called good shepherds, Hezekiah and Josiah were not able to stop the flock from being devastated in war and exile.

In its own way, the use of sheep and shepherds for leaders and the nation and ultimately for God sets us up for how the gospel imaginary comes to roost on Jesus, who never herded a sheep in his life.

There are hints of course, that Jesus’ strange way of speaking, that his associates and activities point to a different kind of kingship than the portraits of Israel’s past.

But the early followers are still hoping, their imagination can’t get away from “boots on the ground, triumph, things will get better, the church will grow, the society will bend to our will, we’ll be safe.”

But then Luke pulls down the curtain.

I googled controversial portraits of leaders and what I found was that often, whether it was the controversy that erupted over Graham Sutherland’s infamous portrait of Churchill in 1954 or the recent ones of Barak Obama, the criticism was that they weren’t “triumphant enough,” “strong enough” or “statesmanlike.”

But, here’s the thing, after the fact, like Churchill’s wife admitted, the artist did in fact capture him brilliantly.

And so when Luke pulls the curtain down, we gasp, we are shocked, the champagne flutes smash on the floor, but as the great tradition has unfolded, as one tumultuous century has followed another we’ve also come to recognize the truth of the portrait.

The way this King embodies justice, loyalty, the very salvation of God is most truthfully portrayed through this heap of weakness, this slumped, bleeding body, nailed in place so that the taunts can’t be escaped.

What this Feast helps us wrestle with is that we don’t move from this portrait to a renewed sense of triumph: this is the *ongoing* reality of how God and God’s Christ Reign!

Through forgiveness, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” Through a comprehensive forgiveness that extends to all who damage the earth, who set barriers in the way of justice; it extends even to those who have damaged us!

Because it extends even to those who put him there we can say with confidence that it extends to you and I at our worst! To just those parts of our personal portrait that we would never want any artist to display.

This forgiveness is offered to us at just those points of the journey when we are most apt to say “for *that* I cannot be forgiven because, truth be told I wouldn’t forgive that.”

I was deeply moved this past week when the first person ever elected to congress who wears the hijab, Ilhan Omar, from Denise’s hometown of Minneapolis urged compassion towards someone who was recently convicted of threatening her assassination.

She did this in face of many people who claim to be Christians urging what would amount to an illegal deportation of a citizen; she did this in the face of a President who has told her “to go back to the country she came from.”

In that response she is participating in the reign of Christ; as a muslim she is exhibiting a participation in the reign of Christ too scarcely demonstrated by Christians.

What Luke unveils moves us deeply because in it we see that what was meant as a taunt, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” voiced by, in turn, the leaders, by the soldiers and by the one criminal is, ironically, the deepest truth of the portrait.

Forgiveness is what we are saved *from,* Salvation is the wholeness we are invited *towards*.

It speaks of a flourishing, an equality that flows from a deep and genuine reconciliation.

Our greatest obstacles when it comes to solving our greatest problems are not, first of all technological, they are relational.

So says, not me, but one of the great climate change experts Narasimho Rao who says that working to ameliorate inequality through offering meaning, encouraging each other towards sustainable lifestyles, sustainable diets, living in modest homes etc. *will* help stem the flood of the worst sorts of effects we might expect far more effectively than technological “solutions.”

Here he is, another non-Christian by the way, basically telling the world that it is the Christ-way, the reign of Christ, the way Christ works for the good of the world, in weakness, through weakness, for all, that will save us!

We’re looking at this portrait of the world’s Messiah, this bleeding figure nailed into place by a humanity that will, initially have none of it but then forgiveness is given and salvation is offered and then find that it is this weakness that opens us our hearts.

“Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.” “today you will be with me in paradise.”

It is this weakness that reveals presence and melts our stubborn, violent hearts. It is this Person, this King, this reign that we invoke, that we count on at this table.

This is beautiful and haunting song that Colossians sings, so that now this horrible weakness can be celebrated as the glorious power of God; it is shocking portrait that in it’s time reveals the most exquisite beauty, that calls us to share this inheritance so that we too can strong in our weakness, beautiful in our sacrificial love and committed to making ourselves and world a better place

I remember the moment when sitting in an SFU library when as a passionate charismatic evangelical I was reading *The Dream of the Rood,* an anonymous English poem from the Middle Ages and in that moment read the words “feeble in his victory” and the desire to be “with it” part of an attractive, successful enterprise fell out of my hands and shattered on the floor.

My journey into this “heap of weakness” as it sometimes feels, the Anglican Church has been difficult and wonderful: I wouldn’t trade it and this difficult and wonder continue

We are part of the Body of Christ committed to embracing God’s forgiveness and redemption, embracing the Reign of Christ: the reconciliation of all things, one small thing at a time.